

DEC 25 2003

# **S.D. County objects to helping pay federal fine**

State penalized for not updating  
child support collection system

**By Helen Gao, STAFF WRITER**

San Diego County is joining with other counties to try to overturn a state budget provision requiring them to pay \$52 million in federal fines for California's failure to have a computerized child support collection system.

The fiscal 2004 budget adopted under then-Gov. Gray Davis allows the state to bill counties for 25 percent of a \$208 million federal penalty.

San Diego County's share would be \$3.3 million.

County officials said they cannot afford the expense, especially because the state has cut revenues to local governments.

"It's just one more thing that is being dumped on counties in California to deal with at a time when we have a full plate," said county Board of Supervisors Chairman Greg Cox, who also is first vice president of the California State Association of Counties.

The association has lobbied Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to drop the budget provision. He has not made a decision, but the state so far has not billed counties, an association official said.

"Obviously, the \$3.3 million is not going to make or break San Diego County, but when you add all these together, at some point services are going to be impacted because we have not had the revenues we have had historically," Cox said.

If San Diego County is forced to help pay for

SEE Child support, B8

## ► CHILD SUPPORT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1

### County says it can't afford to help on fine

the federal penalty, the money would come out of an \$11 million reserve that covers contingencies for such departments and offices as the sheriff's, district attorney's, probation, emergency services, medical examiner's and child support services.

W. Harold Tuck Jr., a deputy chief administrative officer who oversees the county's public safety agencies, said he opposes using the reserve funds. That money may be needed to cover additional state revenue cuts and expenses from the October wildfires. "That \$3 million could go to a variety of things in San Diego County," Tuck said.

However, if the state bills the county, the reserves will be used, he said.

The federal government has been fining California hundreds of millions each year since 1997 when its effort to create a statewide child support collection system collapsed and cost taxpayers \$157 million.

A federal law enacted in 1988 required states to have such a system by Oct. 1, 1997, to track parents who move from county to county or state to state to avoid paying child support.

California and South Carolina are the only states that do not have statewide child support collection systems.

Lynn Cavanaugh, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Child Support Services, said she could not reach officials in the California Health and Human Services Agency, which administers child support services, or the governor's office for comment on whether the counties would be billed for the federal fine.

State officials have estimated that California has about a million cases of uncollected child support. In fiscal 2003, California collected \$2.4 billion for child support, of which \$157 million came from San Diego County.

San Diego County has about 139,000 active child support cases and, for the first time last fiscal year, met the federal standard of collecting at least 40 percent of money owed.

One in six residents in the county has contact with the Child Support Services Department.

California's 58 counties now

use five separate computerized collection systems, resulting in duplicated efforts in tracking parents who don't pay their child support.

"The whole thing is just a nightmare for families," said Geraldine Jensen, president of the Association for Children for Enforcement of Support.

California is trying for a second time to develop an integrated collection system under an \$801 million, eight-year contract signed in July with IBM Corp.

Putting the system in place is expected to eventually cost \$1.3 billion.

Thomas Boardman, the county's director of Child Support Services, is wary of the project, a sentiment echoed by the Child Support Directors Association of California.

The state has had a history of fiascos when it undertook large-scale computer projects at the Department of Motor Vehicles and the California state university system.

"The vast majority of computer projects this big fail," said Boardman, who previously served as the county's chief technology officer.

**Helen Gao: (619) 718-5181;**  
helen.gao@uniontrib.com